

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CHINESE AND ENGLISH INTERPERSONAL APPELLATION SYSTEMS

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## 汉英称谓系统之比较研究

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# INTRODUCTION

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## 0.1 Interpersonal Appellation System(IAS), Culture and Situation

### 0.1.1 IAS and Culture

The interpersonal appellation system (IAS) refers to modes of personal references used in social interactions (田惠刚 1998: 1). It is an important part of the language by which people identify each other or themselves so as to play their roles properly, establish and maintain relationships in the society. Forms of address are the interpersonal appellations that are used in oral communication. In other words, forms of address are utterances used in calling and referring to people in verbal communication.

People in society have to play roles. An important function of the IAS, especially forms of address, is what Claire Kramsch (2000: 42) calls “social positioning” or what Goffmann identifies as “footing,” i.e., “the stance people take up to themselves and to the others as expressed in the way they manage the production or reception of utterances.” This social positioning or “footing” is essential. Only by defining our roles, or our relationship with others properly, can we engage in social communications effectively. Human relations are culture-specific. According to Kluckhohn and Strodtback (Jandt 1995: 85-86), a culture answers several basic questions, and one of them is “what is the relationship of humans to each other?” And each culture provides answers to it in its own unique way. How does a culture imbue its answers to its people? It was first discovered through experimentation by the Austrian zoologist and founder of ethnology, Konrad

Lorenz (1954/1977) (quoted in Katan 1999: 62) that “early experience is crucial in forming life-long beliefs about identity and relationships.” It is also asserted by Kardiner (1945: vi-viii) that the formation of roles and beliefs about human relationship is a result of “common early experiences.” This position suggests:

Cultural traditions determine what lessons the parent will teach their child; that different cultures have different lessons and different ways of teaching; that experience casts a lasting effect on the child and that similar experiences will produce similar results.

All these experiments and observations confirm that human beings become socially bound under cultural influences in their early age and through education.

Culture is an all-inclusive term, and can be tailored in its definition to suit various purposes. Look at the concisely described and frequently quoted definition of this term in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (1983 vol. 4: 657), formulated by the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor: “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Here culture is interpreted as learned “capabilities and habits” acquired by people in the process of socialization. Or, to make it more descriptive or understandable, we have a version from American anthropologists Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, contributed after they had compiled a list of 164 definitions for culture (quoted in Katan 1999: 16):

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning elements of future action.

At the core of culture are beliefs, ideas, and values. Viewed on the whole, culture includes all the achievements or results of the activities of the people involved, i.e., a historical accumulation. The present thesis defines culture as “traditions, beliefs, and values formulated by the people through historical accumulation and development of the

society.” It is associated with the history of the people, with the environment, economy and other social conditions. In a word, it is associated with the social development.

### **0.1.2 IAS and situation**

People in society each have multiple roles to play, which vary according to specific situations. Halliday (1978: 6) analyzes the concept of situation in three aspects: field (referring to the activity and subject of the speaker), tenor (referring to the role of the speaker and relationship between the participants), and mode (referring to the function of language, or the purpose of the speaker). Appellation system involves all aspects of the situation, especially tenor. That is to say, the changes in relationships or roles of the participants bring about changes in interpersonal addresses. For example, a man who works as a teacher is addressed by his students as “*Professor Wang*, ” and “*Lao Wang*” by his colleagues; when he goes to the market and bargains with the sellers, he may be called “*sh fù*” (master); after that, he may meet with an old friend who greets him as “*l o tóng xué*” (old classmate); later, he goes back home, and his son calls him “*bà bà*” (*dad*), while his wife calls him by his first name “*Da Zhi*.” All these addresses refer to the same person whose roles have been changing constantly: a teacher, a colleague, a customer, a friend or classmate, a father and a husband.

The above demonstrates that interpersonal relations and roles differ from society to society, from culture to culture, and from situation to situation, which leads not only to various appellations in one language, but also to unique characteristics of appellation systems in different languages.

### **0.1.3 Socio-cultural Setting and Pragmatic Setting**

As Sapir (quoted in Foley 1997: 41) observed, language, the most prominent feature of culture, is “far more compact and self-contained than culture taken as a whole.” Therefore, it is reasonable to study language along with the non-verbal culture as its framework or background. Bronislaw Malinowski (quoted in Katan 1999: 72) was one of the first anthropologists to identify what he calls “a context of culture.” In 1923, he also coined another term “context of situation,” maintaining that “a language could only be fully understood when these two contexts (situation and culture) were implicitly or

explicitly clear to the interlocutors and hearers” (Ibid). Halliday (1978: 34) also regarded language as a “culturally specific and situationally sensitive range of meaning potential ... Language is the ability to ‘mean’ in the situation types, or social contexts, that are generated by the culture.” Language is made up of choices to realize the meaning potential in various specific situations in a socio-cultural context. It is with this in mind that I divide the context into “pragmatic setting (narrow context)” and “socio-cultural setting (broad context),” both of which contribute to the meaning of language.

To begin with, let’s first look at the meaning of language. The famous assertion by Halliday “meaning is only possible in use” means that language is the ability to ‘mean,’ but divorced from the context, it loses its meaning. Meaning can be viewed from two aspects: semantic and pragmatic. To take a specific example: If someone says to you,

*Would you mind passing the book over there to me?*

How are you going to interpret the meaning of this utterance? Firstly, you have to know English. Maybe you have learned English and have heard people ask questions beginning with “*would you mind...*” So you know it is a way of making requirements—the usual norm of making requirements for English-speaking nations. This is *the semantic meaning*. It is necessary, but not enough. You have to gain more information besides English. You have to know, for example, who said this, what place “there” stands for; what “you” and “me” (personal deixis) refer to, etc. All these cannot be obtained from the language alone. That is to say, you need the specific pragmatic setting to make them out. You can, actually, learn who’s talking to you by seeing with your own eyes, and you gain information from the addressor’s facial expression, gesture, and the surroundings. Everything around you seems to be helpful to you in deciding what is the speaker’s intention—that is *the pragmatic meaning*. The two aspects of meaning is necessary, so are the two aspects of contexts. That is why Kramsch (2000: 15) states, “language can mean in two fundamental ways, through what it says or what it refers to as an encoded sign (semantic), and through what it does as an action in context (pragmatic).” It also provides two ways of analyzing language: semantically (from the language and the culture in which it is used) as well as pragmatically (from the immediate



situation).

To conclude, the IAS, i.e., the modes of personal references used in social interactions, as part of the language system, should be studied in its socio-cultural contexts. This is necessary for the interpretation of the semantic meaning of different appellations. In addition, as the specific situations, and the constant changes in roles and relationships of the participants affect the choice of interpersonal appellations, we need to look at IAS from a pragmatic point of view, so as to interpret the pragmatic meaning as well.

## 0.2 Classification of IAS

The IAS consists of four subsystems (田惠刚 1998: 2):

- (1). **Kinship terms**. This group of interpersonal appellations is used for referring to relatives either by blood, by marriage or by law.
- (2). **Social appellations**. This group includes the interpersonal appellations used in social interactions according to the participants' social classes and relative status.
- (3). **Names**. These include family names (last names) and given names (first names).
- (4). **Personal pronouns**. These are pronouns used to refer to the addressor (first person), addressee (second person) and a third party (third person).

## 0.3 Scope of Analysis and Organization of This Thesis

Chapter One provides: 1. an overview of the development of the Chinese and Western societies and cultures, which offers a socio-cultural perspective for interpreting the two appellation systems; 2. a historical view of the changes that occurred in the interpersonal appellation systems in both English and Chinese as a result of the social and cultural development. Chapters Two through Four are devoted to analyzing three types of appellations in modern Chinese and English: kinship terminology, social appellations (include names), and personal pronouns. In the last chapter, Chapter Five, an analysis is conducted to see how the Chinese people and the British or American peoples actually integrate various forms of address and use them in real situations.

#### 0.4 Abbreviations Used in This Thesis

Abbreviations used in this thesis are explained as follows:

**IAS** – interpersonal appellation system (s)

**SA** – social appellations

**KT** – kinship terminology or kinship term(s)

**FN** – first name (s)

**LN** – last name (s)

**TLN** – title (s) +LN

## CHAPTER 1

# Societies, Cultures, and IAS

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Chinese Society, Culture and Characteristics of IAS
- 1.3 The Western Society, Culture and Characteristics of IAS
- 1.4 Conclusion

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, Chinese societies are agricultural ones, while western societies are industrial ones. Historically, as the feudal system continued in China for over 2000 years, from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1911 AD), China remained an agricultural country. It is only after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially since the reform and opening up of China to the outside world in the early 1980's that the nation's economy has achieved unprecedented growth, which has given rise to diversified forms of economy, including various industries and foreign trade. The western countries, especially the Western European countries and US, have become modernized after the Industrial Revolution around 1750, which first happened in Britain, and spread to the United States and the European continent in the nineteenth century, as Perry described in his *Western Civilization* (1993: 331):

After 1760, dramatic changes occurred in Britain in the way goods were produced and labor organized. New forms of power, particularly steam, replaced animal strength and human muscle. Better ways of obtaining and using raw materials were discovered, and a new form of organizing production and workers—the factory—came into use. In the nineteenth century, technology moved from triumph to triumph with a momentum unprecedented in human history. The resulting explosion in economic production and productivity transformed society with breathtaking speed.

China, at present, is moving towards industrialization and modernization, which had been experienced in the west two hundred years ago, though there seems a long way to go yet. In the rural areas, there still lives about 80% of the total population. That is to say, China is still a big country with agriculture as its basic means of productivity. From this perspective, traditional Chinese and western societies can be roughly categorized as agricultural and industrial ones respectively.

## 1.2 The Chinese Society, Culture and Characteristics of IAS

### 1.2.1 The Chinese Society

Firstly, let's look at agricultural societies. A general yet vivid description of agricultural society given by drawn by Claire Renzetti (1998: 90): "*Agricultural societies* (also called *agrarian societies*), utilize plows, draft animals, and other methods, such as irrigation to cultivate crops as a subsistence strategy." By turning the soil, plows permit land to be farmed for decades, so people live in permanent settled communities. Large food surpluses, transported on animal-drawn wagons, allow societies' population to climb into millions.

This was the case in China: once people settled down in a place, they lived there for generations. China's population, for example, exceeded 400 million at the beginning of the twentieth century.

However, as observed by sociologists, "inequality appears to be a built-in feature of the agricultural social system" (Calhoun 1994: 91). There were two major classes in the Chinese society under the feudal system: the landlords and the peasants, i.e., the oppressor and the oppressed. The hierarchy of the society was like a pyramid: on top of it sat the emperor, the head of the feudal lords; the whole society was strictly and intricately stratified among various walks of life, with little social mobility (change of social status). Most people tended to remain in the same social positions, with unchanged social statuses as when they were born (唐得阳 1993: 535). For example, a carpenter's son was likely to take up carpentry as his lifelong vocation, a farmer's child would become farmers, and a landlord's son would inherit his father's title as well as property.

The Chinese feudal society is characterized by its patriarchal clan system. *Patriarchy* is

defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Vol.8, 1981: 800) as follows:

Patriarchy is a hypothetical social system based on the absolute authority of the father or an elderly male over the family group. ..In the nineteenth century, pioneering anthropologists Lewis Henry Morgan and Henry Maine envisioned cultures as having developed through evolutionary stages, one of which was patriarchy. Maine felt that all status or relationship in the earliest societies derived from a patriarchal kinship system, and that all decisions of social consequences were the arbitrary judgments of a quasi-tyrannical patriarch. Sometimes patriarchy also includes in its meaning patria potestas, the system in which power to govern members of even the extended family rested in the hands of a father and his kin.

China's patriarchal system can be traced back to the West Zhou Dynasty, when extended families began to prevail in ancient China. "The emperor of Zhou, head of the clan, united the whole country and divided the land among his kin in accordance with their patrilineal blood relations in the clan. Thus a number of princely states were set up. Within each state, the king had absolute authority. However, all the kings had to obey and pay tribute to the emperor of Zhou, who was at the top of the hierarchy, and was actually the head of the clan to which all the kings belonged" (王玉波 1992: 56). The country was, therefore, joined together by one big clan, the Zhou Clan. For the two thousand years, the feudal system in China does not change much in this aspect. The whole country was like one big family. The emperor (also called wàn suì yé 万岁爷 or tiān zǐ 天子, in Chinese, meaning *grandfather of ten thousand years old* or *first-born son of the heaven* respectively) was regarded as the head of the big family or the country, or guójiā 国家 in Chinese, meaning *state family*, the officials, as fù mǔ guān 父母官 (parent officials), and the people or subjects were the children, as zǐ mǐn 子民, meaning *children masses*. The country and the family/clan were of the same structure in feudalist China. The country, including the lives of the subjects, belonged to the feudal monarchy, just as property belonged to the head of the extended family. The saying that "if the emperor wants an officials to die, he has no other choice than to die; if the father of the family wants his son to die, neither does he have any choice but to die," had been held true as the law for the feudal patriarchal country. In other words, the monarchy and the head of the family or clan enjoyed absolute power over the people and members of the family or clan. It seems that the composers of *the Encyclopedia Britannica* did not study China carefully, otherwise they would not have regarded patriarchy

as “hypothetical.” In China, the feudal society was in every sense patriarchal.

Another related term that characterizes Chinese feudal society is clan. Clan is also described in details in *the Encyclopedia Britannica* (Vol.2, 1981: 962):

Clan is a group of fundamental importance in the social structure of many societies. Members of a clan are socially defined in terms of actual or purported descents from a common ancestor or ancestress. This descent is unilineal – i.e., derived only through the male (patriclan) or the female (matriclan). ..Clan membership may be useful in ensuring mutual support and defense as well as in the mediation of disputes over the transmission of property rights and the mode of residence after marriage. Through exogamy, a clan may increase its number and consolidate alliances through affinal (marital) bonds. ... Recent research has also emphasized the importance of the clan as a corporate group, wherein a lineage often operates as if it were a single person and perpetuates itself from generation to generation, controlling membership rights and maintaining ties with past generations through rites and rituals.

China’s patriclan system, maturing in the West Zhou Dynasty, lasted for thousands of years. In China’s feudal society, clan had been an economical as well as political institution. It was made up of several or many related extended families. Family was the basic social unit, and the cell of the clan. The family was seen as a microcosm of the socio-political order: the father is the head of his family, with the females and the young under his rule. He was the law of the family in the same way the emperor was the law of the state. The head of the family was responsible for settling domestic disputes; the head of the clan assumed the responsibility for settling disputes among clan members. The father of the family obeyed the head of the clan, the head of the clan was submissive to the head of the prestigious clan, and the local administrator supervised the head of the prestigious clan. It was in this way that the family was integrated into the political system of the state (田惠刚 1998: 222). It was in this way that the family/clan was strictly and intricately stratified as if it were a country.

The above analysis demonstrates that the feudalist China was functioned like a big family, and the feudal Chinese clan, like a small country. In other words, the state and the clan were of the same structure in feudalist China.

### **1.2.2 The Chinese Culture**

The dominating ideology of the Chinese feudal society was Confucianism, which was founded by K’ung Fu-tzu (Confucius) during the Warring States (475-221 B.C.), China’s

classical age. The basic world views of Confucianism are described in *Eight Lectures On Chinese Culture* (赵太和, 赵阳 1998: 119) as follows:

Confucians in all ages viewed the natural world and human worlds (sic.) as an organism made up of multitudinous interconnected parts. When any one of the parts fell its place (sic.) or was disrupted in its functioning, the harmony of the whole was impaired. Heaven, which was neither deity nor blind fate presided over this organic whole and was a force for harmony and balance. But man was the principal agent of both harmony and disharmony. Out of ignorance or perversity, men (sic.) could cause serious disruptions; by the application of knowledge, wisdom, and discipline, men (sic.) could restore harmony.

Confucius tried to expound a new code of ethics for the society—the *Principles of Li* (manners), because discipline and self-control was regarded as the only remedy for social chaos. By knowing one's duty and fulfilling it, one can do the greatest good to the society—keeping the harmony of it, or even the harmony and balance of the whole universe. Confucius is said to have taught his disciples “the cultivation of personal virtue (rén 仁 or goodness), veneration of one's parents (filial piety), love of learning, loyalty to one's superiors, kindness to one's subordinates, and a high regard for all of the customs, institutions, and rituals that make for civility” (Allen 1999: 79). He and his followers Xunzi and Mengzi helped to develop the social and political order for the feudalist China, an order that had endured for more than 2000 years. His *Analects*, a collection of 497 sayings and short dialogues written down by his disciples after his death, has been regarded as the Bible of the Chinese people. It has been taught and recited for thousands of years. The core of Confucianism is what we call **Ming Fen Da Yi** 名分大义, its translation being *the Great Principle of Honor and duty*—the duty of loyalty and filial piety (辜鸿铭 1998: 38-42). As Zhao (赵太和 1998: 120) observes: “According to Confucian ideals, the social order was hierarchy, state and society was fused into a seamless whole, and everyone knew his place and was content; a monarchy presided over the whole, next in rank came the elite, and at the base of the pyramid came the peasantry.” Since everyone should know his/her duty and obligations to others and act accordingly, Confucius and others explicitly defined norms of proper social behavior, governing the relationships between emperor and his officials (rén 仁 or humanness, and loyalty), parents and children (filial piety), between brothers

(brotherliness), and between friends (truthfulness), etc. Confucius believed that “humane conduct begins at home in family members’ interactions with one another, then carries over to the local community, and eventually infuses the entire society” (Calhoun 1994: 458). All these ideologies had been imbued from generation to generation and become part of the Chinese psyche, leaving a far-reaching influence on Chinese people and society.

The core of the Chinese culture is clanism (a literally translated term from the Chinese equivalent 家族主义) (段连城 1993: 116), i.e., attaching utmost importance to the clan/family. Firstly, the Chinese attach great importance to their families and clans, or to the relationships among the kin. Secondly, they expand this relation to include those belonging to the same district or town, using addresses like **Tóngxiāng** 同乡, meaning *fellow town people*. Thirdly, they again extend this relationship to the whole country. As a result, they refer to themselves as **zìjiā** 自家(my family), to others as **rénjiā** 人家(family of the others), to the addressee as **nǐjiā** 你家(your family) and to all people within a group as **dàjiā** 大家(big family), and lastly, they refer to the country as **guójiā** 国家(country family, with country as a modifier). Some distinctive features of the typical Chinese personality can be explained with reference to the education of Confucianism and experience of living in the traditional extended family. Tang (唐得阳 1993: 814) describes three traits of the typical Chinese personality: Firstly, the Chinese stress the importance of collectivism. The family/clan weighs much more than the individual in it. All one does should be responsible for his or her own family/clan. One’s own shame and fame is also that of the family/clan. Even one’s marriage is a matter of the whole clan. Secondly, the Chinese tend to have a strong sense of duty. They know well what their positions are in family/clan, and are expected to fulfill their duties to other members within it. Thirdly, the Chinese tend to be more obedient. They tend to have a strong sense of stratification; they must respect the old or the superior and take care of the young.

### 1.2.3 Characteristics of the Chinese IAS

The above is a fairly general picture of the Chinese feudal societies and typical Chinese traditions, which can serve as explanations for the unique characteristics of the Chinese IAS.



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